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Here's some lively history by a well-known Wisconsin author. Whether you are a believer or a skeptic, you can't afford to miss what Mr. Jacobs has prepared for you.

The Wisconsin Milk Strikes

by Herbert Jacobs

The economists, of which I am not one, take a comforting view of strikes. They call them a product and an indicator of good times. When production and profits are high, that's when the worker decides to hit for his share of the gains. The boss can afford to give a little, rather than have his plant tied up at a time when everybody wants to buy his product, and the workers know it.

But I don't think the economists were thinking about milk strikes when they laid down that rule about strikes being an indicator of prosperity. Rather, I think the Wisconsin milk strikes, concentrated in the year 1933, were a product of desperation. They climaxed a dozen years of falling farm prices, when the farmer saw the prices of the things he sold going down steadily, while the prices of the things he needed to buy remained the same or increased. The strikes preceded the economic upsurge of the New Deal, when an expanding economy gobbled up dairy products at rising prices. This was followed by the booming war years when practically anybody could make money at farming. The dairy farmer still had plenty of troubles preceding and during the war years, but they were not tough enough to make him think of strikes any more.

It was a time of ferment and turmoil. Looking back at it now, it seems almost as if we were close to revolution, and perhaps we were. Milk, the kind that went to cheese and butter factories and condenseries, brought the farmer about 75 to 85 cents a hundred pounds, or slightly over a cent and a half a quart. In some regions the farmer only got 60 cents out of which also came hauling charges. The kings in the business were the farmers who supplied the fluid market—bot-

tled milk for the cities. They got a whole dollar and a half for a hundred pounds. Since most Wisconsin milk goes into manufactured products, like cheese, butter, and ice cream mix, these "kings" were less than 10 percent of the farmers.

I'm not certain that the crisis hour calls forth the right man to cope with it, but anyway three colorful and dynamic figures were on hand to translate "farm unrest" into farm revolt. I think there would have been some sort of milk strike even if these three men had not appeared, but they certainly didn't tend to quiet things down.

All around Wisconsin, in the dozen months preceding 1933, the Middle West was aflame with a seething farm violence. Milk strikes, dumping of milk, livestock embargoes, clashes between farmers and law officers were the order of the day, from New York State through all of the Midwest. The only wonder is that Wisconsin didn't join the procession earlier. Many Wisconsin farmers took a hand in trying to keep livestock from being shipped to Iowa when the Farm Holiday Association there called a meat animal strike, and they watched and read about the rural turmoil in Illinois, Indiana, and other states. Wisconsin farmers were spoiling for a fight, and three men were on hand to lead them to it.

One of them was Arnold Gilberts, a Dunn County man who headed the Wisconsin Farm Holiday Association. A gentle, angular, and good-natured man, he gave an appearance of great sincerity and earnestness. But he was capable, under stress, of firebrand statements that surprised his audiences and possibly himself. For instance, at a mass meeting of some 5,000 or more farmers at Marshfield, on September 2, 1932, Gilberts was quoted



Flaming Logs Stop Car Near New London

as saying: "We'll solve our problems with bayonets, and I don't mean maybe."

Another of the three musketeers of Wisconsin farm revolt was Milo Reno, national president of the Farm Holiday. True, he was from Iowa, but he came to Wisconsin frequently for speeches, and he did perhaps more than anyone to lay the groundwork for what followed. He was a short, school-teacherish sort of fellow, with a tremendous shock of white hair, and a wonderful gift of dramatic speech and homely illustration. I have seen him sway an audience of 4,000 to his will, like wind bowing a field of green oats. It all seemed so simple, the way he put it, and they ate it up. Everybody forgot that Iowa was a corn and hog state, where you could withhold farm products for months without hurting the farmer much. Nobody remembered that Wisconsin was a dairy cow state, and that cows produce milk twice a day, and you've got to do something with it right away.

And then there was Walter M. Singler of Shiocton, president of the Wisconsin Co-operative Milk Pool which had been organized two years before to give small farmers bargaining power with the dairies. He was a giant paradox of a man, a roaring dynamo, where Milo Reno was more a wisecracking

salesman. Barrel-chested Singler stood six feet two, and weighed 230 pounds. Atop his head was a light-colored Texas style hat—maybe two gallons instead of ten. His black hair was luxuriant, he had a conspicuous mustache, and a ridiculously small goatee, almost lost in his ruddy complexion. He sported flamboyant, reddish-colored waistcoats, and—crowning affront to Wisconsin farmers—he wore spats. The costume and appearance were those of a circus barker rather than a farmer, and by rights the farmers should have hooted him out of town. Instead, they practically worshipped him. Few of them knew that he had been an oil promoter and land speculator in Texas, and that his farming experience was extremely limited. He talked their language, and he promised action, and that was enough for them. The Fox River valley and nearby territory was the stronghold of his milk pool, but his name was a powerful stimulant throughout the rest of the State.

But it would be a mistake to think of the Wisconsin milk strikes only in terms of these three men. Farm foreclosures, skinny, ragged kids, the realization that each year you were farther behind financially than the year before—all these built up a powerful head of steam. Somewhere between 5,000 and 8,000

farmers turned out for the meeting at Marshfield, September 2, 1932, when the Wisconsin Farm Holiday was organized, while a Holiday strike was then going on in Iowa. In a few months the organization claimed a membership of 130,000 out of Wisconsin's 180,000 farmers. Part of this was merely paper, for the dues were less than a dollar a year, and the organization never became anything but a highly sleepy giant, always threatening action, but never getting up off the ground.

Singler's Milk Pool, on the other hand, had something like 6,700 members, recruited largely from the smaller, marginal type of farmer, shipping milk to small local cheese factories and condenseries. They literally had nothing to lose, and they had the courage of desperation. The more prosperous farmers (if that term can be applied to conditions of 1933), in general those with good herds, supplying the city markets, actively opposed Singler and all he stood for. They had a comparatively good thing, and they didn't want to take a chance on losing it.

Thus the milk strikes were partly civil war among the farmers as well as a fight against the commercial dairy interests, and this internal battle gave them their peculiar character.

The State resounded during the winter of 1932-33 with talk of milk strikes and farm

holidays. Milo Reno spoke several times in the southern part of the State, but Singler's star began to eclipse that of Arnold Gilberts and Reno. He brought things to a head at a meeting of the Milk Pool directors, February 8, 1933, when he told them bluntly, "Call a strike or quit."

The directors authorized the strike, to be called at Singler's discretion. But he refused to designate it as a strike. He announced merely that the farm price for milk would be \$1.40 per hundred, starting the morning of February 15. Everybody was supposed to hold his milk for that price. But when the strike deadline came, since the Milk Pool was outnumbered at least 20 to 1, a lot of farmers ignored the Singler edict and shipped their milk.

The Milk Pool was able, by persuasion or methods close to intimidation, including dumping of quantities of milk along the highways, to close up most of the small cheese and butter factories of the Fox River valley, where the Pool was strongest. Then the Pool turned its attention to the larger cities, regarding them as the key to break the price deadlock. And here they bucked the non-Pool members. Log chains across the road, barricades of old boxes or logs, and even masses of men in the road were used to halt milk trucks. Those who would not turn back had



Special Deputy-Guardsmen Charging with Bayonets at Durham Hill

their loads dumped. Sheriff's deputies used tear gas and clubs to break up the picket groups, but there were too many places, and too few officers. Even private cars, as well as trucks, were stopped and searched, to the great indignation of the public.

Campfires of pickets blazed all night beside crossroads leading to big towns like Milwaukee. But what the pickets didn't see and could not stop were the convoys of milk trucks slipping by them in the dark over side roads, and the trains carrying extra cars of milk. There were many cases, too, of farmers arranging to have their own milk transported, and then dashing out to the picket lines to stop the milk of more gullible farmers. The big cities kept on getting all the milk they really needed. And the rural milk processing plants, even though closed, were not worrying, because there was such a big backlog of manufactured dairy products.

In spite of some rough spots, it was a fairly good-humored strike on both sides, though largely ineffective. Singler called it off February 22, after an all-night mass meeting at Madison, at which twenty-one farm organizations refused to go along with him any farther. Singler claimed a strike victory because Governor Schmedeman promised to "study" the milk price question, but detractors said he quit because he was licked.

They were wrong. Singler and the Pool were just getting started. On April 11, 1933, at Appleton, plans were made for a forty-state strike of farmers, to include other products besides milk. Arnold Gilberts said his 130,000 Holiday members were going to join the strike.

Possibly in view of this threat, many State dairies on April 16 agreed to go along with the governor's suggestion that they increase the price of condensery milk to \$1.00 per hundred, by adding 15 cents to the current price.

This failed to pacify either the Milk Pool or the Farm Holiday. They went ahead with plans for a jumbo strike May 12. The governor countered this, on the eve of the strike, by ordering an embargo on all milk movement until each county had a chance to decide whether or not to go along with the strike. On May 12, the day the strike began, the governor lifted the embargo for fifty-two of the State's seventy-one counties, because a majority of the farmers in those counties disapproved of the strike.

Another body blow came to the Milk Pool the same day, when Milo Reno called off the Farm Holiday which he had just ordered. The Milk Pool was going it alone again, but this time it had more opposition from the State. Adjutant General Ralph Immell placed 2,500 National Guardsmen at the disposal of local sheriffs, to be sworn in as special



The Last of Seven Carloads of Milk Dumped Near Burlington

deputies. The State arranged to furnish a more potent form of gas—not merely tear gas this time, but tear gas plus a gas that was an emetic and cathartic, guaranteed to spoil the day for any striker. Both sides had learned a lot from the first Milk Pool strike and were busy putting the learning to use.

The pickets took to cars instead of camping at crossroads. They swooped down on trucks when no guardsmen were present, dumped the loads, and vanished. Near Mukwonago I saw a new wrinkle, when pickets tossed an old harrow in front of a line of trucks to stop them by puncturing the tires. But the authorities were even more forehanded. The lead truck had a snowplow, which brushed the harrow off the road. The deputies wore gas masks when they exploded their triple-action bombs. And the pickets wore leather gloves to toss the bombs right back before they exploded.

The Milk Pool was getting some unexpected help from jobless city sympathizers, who transferred their factory strike techniques to the countryside. East of Waukesha I saw a man lie down on the tracks to block an interurban electric freight train carrying milk.

An athletic deputy sheriff rolled him off the tracks with a flying tackle. But the militant picket was no farmer. He was an oil truck driver who just happened to be carried away, at the moment, by that spirit of devilry and opposition which lurks in all of us.

At the big Mukwonago receiving plant, where the resplendent guardsmen were leaping in and out of trucks for the benefit of the newsreel cameras, I saw a lone farmer sneak through the mass of them and dump one can of milk. He was a farmer all right, but it turned out that he had only one cow, and she was dry.

The "Battle of Durham Hill," in the southeast corner of Waukesha County, was another memorable occasion. The sheriff had determined to make a show of force and obligingly set the time to suit the convenience of newspaper reporters and photographers. I had difficulty convincing my office by phone that the guardsmen this time had not only guns but bayonets. The office was not really convinced until the photographer appeared with pictures, some hours later. The farmer-pickets were equally hard to convince. After a barrage of gas, the seventy-five guardsmen pushed the farmers over the hill at bayonet point, and the unbelieving pickets kept looking around to see if they really were being prodded with cold steel. The guardsmen seemed equally nervous, and looked as if they would have been glad to drop their guns and run too. Some pickets took refuge in a farmhouse, and one was brought out by a guardsman who held a pistol to his head.

"Is this America?" the farm wife stormed at nobody in particular and, since none of us at the moment were quite sure, she got no answer.

By the time I had finished telephoning my story to the paper, the guardsmen were gone and the pickets were all back in the road, stopping cars.

Other scenes of violence were being enacted elsewhere in the State, notably around Shawano and near Appleton, and blood from noses was flowing almost as freely as milk. Both sides were beginning to play for keeps, when Singler called off the strike May 19. It had cost the State \$100,000 for 2,000 troops and incidentals, and the counties \$70,000 for 4,000 special deputies, not to mention the loss



Walworth County Farmer-Deputies

to farmers from vanished milk checks. The ostensible reason for calling off the strike was to give the new Roosevelt administration time to do something for the farmer. What everybody wanted was "cost of production." Nobody bothered to define it, or put it down in dollars and cents, but the sentiment was unanimous for getting it, preferably by a law which would simply order it for all farmers.

By the fall of 1933 both the Milk Pool and the Farm Holiday Association had concluded that F.D.R. would not come across with cost of production. The Farm Holiday called a strike in several states, to begin October 21. This time the Milk Pool, having seen the Holiday group sit out two strikes, decided to wait until the Holiday proved it meant business.

Reassured that the sleeping giant was really going to get in there and pitch this time, the Milk Pool joined the strike on October 31. Two days later the Farm Holiday called off the embargo just in Wisconsin, leaving the Milk Pool to go it alone again. The announced reason was to give a conference of five Midwest governors in Des Moines time to come up with a plan to save the farmers.

The third strike produced more spectacular violence than its predecessors. At least seven bombs were exploded at cheese factories, one of them resulting in \$15,000 damage. Some 34,000 pounds of milk were dumped at one time in Racine. Governor Schmedeman

threatened to call out the National Guard. A farmer near Madison was shot and killed by a man in a passenger car who had passed through the picket line, then came back fifteen minutes later to argue and fire at the crowd. A man had been killed in each of the other two strikes in accidents involving trucks.

One bright spot was furnished near Milwaukee when deputy sheriffs cleared a path for a bootlegger's truck, announcing solemnly, "The mail, the milk, and the moon must go through."

The strike "petered out" during the first third of November. Farmers in county after county voted to reopen milk plants. Singler demanded the recall of all sheriffs who had tried to keep the roads open, but nothing came of it. The *Wisconsin Democrat*, at Madison, estimated that the farmers had lost \$10,000,000. The Milk Pool turned to building its own plants, but later became quiescent. Singler sued the *Milwaukee Journal* for \$100,000, charging slander in statements made by J. M. Beck, agriculture commissioner, in a broadcast over the *Journal* station, but he lost the case. Later Singler and other Pool officers were involved in lawsuits growing out of various Pool operations.

Meanwhile, the lot of the farmer improved. Whether it was due to the strikes or to better economic conditions is something I leave you to decide.

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